

VZCZCXRO6295
OO RUEHCI
DE RUEHKA #6692/01 3261001
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 221001Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2672
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9489
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1379
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8815
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7666
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006692

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/22/2016

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: EMBATTLED CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER EDGES CLOSER
TO THE DOOR

Classified By: DCM Geeta Pasi, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Though many pitfalls remain, new flexibility from both sides may soon produce a reconstituted election commission and an end to the nationwide blockade. End Summary.

Exit Strategies for Aziz

¶2. (SBU) As the opposition's renewed nationwide transportation blockade enters its third day, hopes are rising that controversial Chief Election Commissioner M.A. Aziz is about to depart on "leave" well beyond the January 2007 election date. The presence on the streets now of activists from almost every party of consequence outside the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's four-party alliance -- including Ershad's Jatiya Party and some very conservative Islamist groups -- underscores Aziz's extreme isolation.

¶3. (C) With rumors swirling about the status of Aziz's reported leave request, the key points seem to be:

-- Aziz is willing to go.

-- The Bangladesh Nationalist Party is on board with Aziz's going on "leave" but is balking at other changes at the commission, particularly the Awami League's public demand that Commissioner Zakaria also exit the scene. Both parties cite as a major concession their acceptance of this face-saving mechanism for removing Aziz.

-- According to Sultana Kamal, the openly pro-Awami League caretaker government adviser, party president Sheikh Hasina told her this morning that the Awami League would continue to attack Commissioner Zakaria publicly but would not insist on his departure, provided three additional "neutral" commissioners are appointed to ensure a "balanced" body.

-- Aziz should go abroad so he can't manipulate the Commission by his proximate presence.

-- The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Aziz himself, and Chief Adviser Ahmed all want assurances from Sheikh Hasina that Aziz's departure will break the deadlock and end the blockade.

Potential Pitfalls

¶4. (C) Publicly, there is a lack of clarity on the official positions of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which further amplifies their mutual distrust. Hasina's track record of pocketing concessions exposes her to

skepticism that she would stand down after Aziz departs, and it is unclear who would become acting chief election commissioner or how the new commissioners would be selected. No one questions the competence of Commissioner Zakaria, and it is doubtful if a new boss or any of the other commissioners could do the job without significant help and maybe more time. Aziz has reportedly said he does not want to go abroad, which could become another point of contention.

Quiet on the Ground

15. (SBU) As of 1600, there are no reports of significant violence in Bangladesh. Police describe the mood of demonstrators in Dhaka as festive, and traffic is heavier than yesterday. Garment producers promise a siege at the presidency tomorrow if the blockade is still in effect, claiming the blockade is costing them (a very inflated) USD 70 million per day.

Diplomatic Role

16. (C) Both parties, the advisers, and officials in Ahmed's office are in constant contact with Ambassador to seek her support for moving the process forward. All have invoked the specter of military intervention in the event of failure to encourage her to press the parties to be flexible. While there are credible reports the military wants very robust rules of engagement if called to support civil authority, there is no evidence the military is eager to take this role on. The caretaker government advisers active in the dialogue continue to express frustration to us at their lack of timely access to Chief Adviser Ahmed, who is, however, clearly available to leaders of the former ruling party.

DHAKA 00006692 002 OF 002

Comment

17. (C) Unexpected flexibility by both parties could mean a breakthrough is in sight, but there are plenty of pitfalls that either party could exploit to abort or undermine a deal. BUTENIS